

Episode 25: Feast of Fools

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-five: Feast of Fools.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: There are several steps to creating a convincing ruse.

The most important, though, of course, hardest to achieve, is believing in it yourself.

Cassian and I were both keeping this sort of secret -- the pretending of the sort where you become the thing you say.

Mine was that I was his. His was that he was king.

Three weeks passed, and we went on three more raids. I sent three more people to Somewhere Else -- capitalized, emphasized -- trying to defend myself -- because these were Rhia's people, these were people she might know, any of these people could be

the soldier she wanted me to meet. I did not want to kill them, but they were trying to kill me.

I did not want to kill them, but I did. Because it was a battle. I still don't know if Somewhere Else is better or worse, but I can hope. That it's at least better than us striking them down and lighting their corpses on fire.

And after every raid, we marched through the town, and I saw the stares the people gave me. *Vatakina eligida. You were supposed to be on our side.*

But I kept riding. I lifted my chin and let whoever was in charge set a victory wreath on my head. I did what they told me but I did not make excuses or lower my gaze. I kept my promise in my heart but didn't dare to put it into action.

Because I was waiting for the poet.

But that was another lie I told myself, tried to make myself believe.

The truth is - I was scared. How easily we slaughtered the *fretim. We brave collective*, they were called, but how easily they fell under our boots as we burned them to the ground.

I was scared to stand with them. I was scared to stand against Cassian, to die like that.

Tell yourself a lie. Turn it into a truth. Bury the shame so deep down inside it no longer stands.

Just wait. Just wait just wait, I told myself. You're doing the right thing to wait. You're doing the right thing to find the poet first.

I visited more families with Cassian -- of our soldiers, his soldiers, that had died. *Ilms-sians-fret*. I didn't get it wrong this time. He gave the sword to the siblings of the one who died, or to the spouse the mother the parent the father, gave them his best solemn face and told them their soldier died well. I offered the best condolences I could. *Ilms sians fret. Gratinoc*. And in their eyes, too, I could see it -- *why didn't you save them? If you're the one we've waited for.*

I wondered if somewhere the *fretim* mourned for the ones we'd killed. They had to have had - families. Lovers. Friends. They existed outside of the void of our missions. Did they do like we did? Bring a relic to the loved ones of the deceased? Tell them more than a kind lie? *This battle was one that mattered.*

The feast drew closer. Bards arrived. The taverns around the castle -- all throughout the city -- began to fill with people from across the land. Cassian and I snuck out -- *snuck out*, where the soldiers let us past the gate with a smirk then an averted glance and there was no real danger to any of it. We visited a tavern -- far different from the one Rhia took me to. There was no current of rebellion there. We wore cloaks and

simple clothes and I covered my head so no one could see my hair. We listened as poets sung songs and the tavern roared around them. They were all splendid singers, but not what I'd found in the *Eligidanim Traem*.

They told the stories of adventures I've never known. How it feels to cross the *solus mantibus* beyond Rhysea and feel the smooth rocks of distant lands beneath your feet. The look of giant trees crashed onto the pebble beaches, stripped of their bark, aching, white, and waiting -- the way the wind sings you to shore. The way the ocean takes you to sleep.

Some of these bards -- I still don't know all the words, even now. I didn't know them then. But the way they're sung, you can *feel* it in your chest -- the aching.

It was very different than Rhia's secret words and *there will come a soldier* and the world narrowing down to a lyre and a singer and the soul-shaking hope that comes with the promise of something better. But it wasn't -- bad.

We made our way back early in the morning, as the stars in their strange constellations disappeared into the sky and it began to hint at sunrise, the gray-blue-black of maybe-morning.

We didn't have to climb through or over anything to get back in. The guards let us through the gate and into the castle and stepped aside from outside my room as Cassian gave me his

blinding smile of *this was nice*. And he looked nice, peasant clothes instead of a king's. He looked -- real.

So I ran inside before he could kiss me. It had been four and a half weeks and we'd only spoken once of the fact that we were, for all intents and purposes, engaged, and it had been a brief exchange, quickly shut down by me. As if I just ignored it, it would go away and Cassian and I would go back to whatever we were before. So when his eyes went soft and he stepped in, half a pace, a question not a command, I slammed the door behind me, because the cry of *traitor, traitor* to Rhia and Cassian both had woken up inside my heart and I knew I needed to bury it.

Really, I knew that there was no going back to before -- you can't unlearn that you've spent months stomping out the only chance Rhysea has at peace. You can't pretend you don't see a monster wearing a crown and calling herself king.

But that didn't mean I felt nothing for Cassian. It just meant I had to keep myself the hell under control.

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Ko-Fi at ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast, where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little lymerick to

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